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## Better City, Better Life, Part II

May 22, 2009 in [Haibao](#), Shanghai by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)



By Gina Anne Russo

In my [first post on the “Better City, Better Life” Expo promotion campaign](#), I focused on the centrality within it of visions of Shanghai as a special sort of distinctively modern and distinctively international Chinese metropolis, but here I’ll emphasize the second half of the slogan, which draws attention to the quality of urban existence. Expo public advertisements don’t just glorify Shanghai’s place in the modern world, they also strive to present Shanghai as a place where good behavior is on display. For example, on the subway one day I ran across a person dressed up as Haibao, and he was surrounded by people in vests that read “Make this city better, be a loveable Shanghaier.” Along with being cute and loveable, however, the most common adjective connected with expected “Expo” behavior is *wenming*. I have been in Shanghai now for nine months, and within those nine months more and more small signs, specifically in very public places, have popped up, telling people how they should be behaving. For example, most escalators now read “stand on the right, walk on the left, use the escalators in a *wenming* way.” Or, “Don’t spit on buses, be more *wenming*.”

*Wenming* is difficult to define. Most dictionaries say it means “civilized,” but this definition carries as many problematic connotations in Chinese as it does in English. Leo Lee, in his book *Shanghai Modern*, traces the development of this word in modern Chinese. The term was originally borrowed from the Japanese, who used the same characters (pronounced differently of course) in the late nineteenth century to define behavior that was specifically “modern” and “Western,” thus maintaining the same connotations as “civilized” in English. This was picked up by China at the beginning of the twentieth century with similar effect.. The Nationalist government in the 1930s emphasized *wenming* behavior; it was often used in publications promoting the New Life Movement put forth by Chiang Kai-shek, a movement which encouraged people to be more hygienic and well mannered in terms of clothes, food, behavior, and deportment.. If we look at textbooks affiliated with the drive to improve *weisheng* (hygiene

or health)—another complex term, whose links to visions of urban modernity are the subject of an [important recent book by Ruth Rogaski](#) we see them using similar language: calling on readers to raise the level of China's *weisheng* by being *wenming* in the way they use the bathroom, stand in line, and so on.



According to Lee, this word shifted in connotation after 1949 to mean “manners” rather than “Western defined behavior.” However, it seems to me that in today’s usage, the meaning still carries this kind of “civilized” meaning. The term tells people not to do things that are considered uncouth or uncivilized by the international community, and by “international community” the reference remains Europe and North America (with Japan or Singapore getting an occasional look-in as perhaps honorary members of the Western modernity club) In this sense, the Expo is connected with making the lives of Shanghai people better, (hence the “better life”) which is inextricably tied with a population that maintains “modern” and “civilized” behavior.

Other public advertisements emphasize Shanghai’s “coming of age” as it becomes a modern part of the Western world in 2010. At Hongqiao airport, for example, a large mural depicts Shanghai (represented by the Oriental Pearl Tower) as it is connected with the rest of the world. Representations from outside China include the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Coliseum, and the Empire State Building. A friend from Hong Kong with whom I was traveling bitterly commented, “So I guess Africa and South America don’t count?”

While this may seem a somewhat simplistic way to read these advertisements, representation of the third world are almost always absent in images of the “global community” (and you’ll look in vain in such visual representations for any sign of India, which constitutes 1/4 of the global community). And a final illustration of this phenomenon brings us back to one place you see Haibao, which is on the interactive TV screens located in many Shanghai taxis. While riding in these cabs, people can watch sponsored advertisements (including ones for the new Barbie Store) or play “Expo” games, ranging from a Dance-Dance-Revolution-like one featuring a gyrating Haibao to trivia quizzes that test (and thereby try to increase?) your knowledge of the “world,”

via answering questions like “What utensils are used to eat pizza?” and “What type of wine is served with fish and spaghetti?” I’ve only seen one non-Western country even mentioned in these games, and it was Japan, and it only figured in one of the many trivia games on offer in the taxis. The message that this sends is that modernity the West, and Shanghai is ready to become a major player in the modern global community. And this will happen with the Expo, the ultimate symbol of Shanghai’s crossover.



With the Expo less than a year away, Shanghai has a lot of preparation still ahead of it (the most pressing of which are the massive building planned in Pudong). But philosophically, Shanghai has been waiting for this opportunity to regain its status as the center of gravity for China’s modernity for decades. To Shanghai people, this has always been Shanghai’s legacy, and current advertisements feed this sentiment by both naming Shanghai as China’s most modern city and tying it to the Western world, creating, in a sense, a two-dimensional modern identity, both national and international. And while these messages include a certain amount of nationalistic fervor, the real star of the show is not China, but China’s most modern city, its gateway to the rest of the world.

**Tags:** [Global Shanghai](#), [Haibao](#), [Shanghai](#), [Shanghai Expo 2010](#)